

“Language is the dress of thought”¹

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INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, I was a medical doctor. It did not last much. I changed and became what at the time was called a sociobiologist. Spending time with animals in Patagonia induced yet another professional mutation: conservation. And being involved in the practice of conservation interventions resulted in a third switch of priorities: environmental ethics.

In other words, I migrated from a profession with some economic potential, Human Medicine, to one that provided at least fun and scientific challenges, animal behavior, to another full of worries and some successes, conservation, until reaching the present stage of dissatisfaction, total despair... concerns and poverty. Fortunately, I believe I am now in a productive path for the appeasement of mind: the philosophy of language. I will in this talk move away from science and into the adventure of changing

¹ Attributed to Samuel Johnson

the world with words... The human factor in this talk is not a vessel colliding against a whale, but language crashing thoughts.

It was Aldous Huxley who wrote in *Words and Reality* (1945):

“Lacking a proper vocabulary, people find it hard, not only to think about the most important issues of life, but even to realize that these issues exist.”

The central point of this talk is that LANGUAGE is partly to blame for the intensification of the crisis of biodiversity. This is so because the present discourse in conservation creates and endorses a **value framework** that is reinforcing, rather than halting, the crisis.

We here do not refer to language just as a tool to communicate, educate or convey information, we refer to language as discourse, a system of ideas that build a perspective of the world, an agenda. We believe that progress in the conservation field could result if we bridge the perspectives on language developed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein with the value system on which humanity today decides its rapport with Nature. That, we propose, will yield a change in paradigm.

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END OF THE INTRODUCTION... CHAPTER 1. Marine mammals elicit a sense of wonder and that creates a state of mind that predisposes to reflect on the value of Nature. The largest species on Earth has been a marine mammal, one close to being annihilated by human will, that is: by humans in full knowledge of the consequences of their acts. The blue whale escaped the misfortune, others did not: the Steller sea cow, the Caribbean monk seal... most likely the Baiji.

The IUCN Red List is the world's most authoritative source of information on the conservation status of species. It categorized about 80,000 of them. According to the Red List, there are more than 4,000 species at the edge of extinction, 36% of the MMs are under a threatened category: critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable. This state of affairs extends beyond MM and to marine life in general. From the 829 migratory charismatic marine species, turtles, cartilaginous and bonefishes, marine mammals and seabirds, 174 are threatened (21% of 829 total). The movie **Finding Nemo** portrayed marine groups integrated by about 1,568 species. Two out of ten of them within these groups are threatened. These data do not advocate, they testify.

While finding Nemo illustrates threatened species, another movie, **Happy Feet**, portrayed a perverse cause for the threat: entanglement. The hero of the film is an entangled penguin... Entanglement, bycatch, and more recently biomass fishing impact life in the ocean. At least 700,000 seabirds are estimated to be killed by long line and gillnet fisheries each year, plus 500,000 marine mammals, turtles... This is the language of numbers, but what do numbers mean?

CHAPTER 2...Svetlana Alexiévich is the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature. One of her books is *Voices for Chernobyl*. Before her, Chernobyl was an accident reported as: “31 deaths directly attributed to it, all among the reactor staff and emergency workers... 350,400 people evacuated and resettled from the most severely contaminated areas”. This, we could say, is the footprint of Chernobyl. But then comes Svetlana that talks to survivors,

in the example I will refer, to a woman that was just married to one of those emergency workers, **pregnant with his child**:

I saw him. He was all swollen and puffed up. You could barely see his eyes. I said, "Vasya, what should I do?" "Get out of here! Go! You have our child." But how can I leave him? He's telling me: "Go! Leave! Save the baby." "First I need to bring you some milk, then we'll decide what to do..." Sometimes it's as though I hear his voice. Alive. Even photographs don't have the same effect on me as that voice. But he never calls to me . . . not even in my dreams. I'm the one who calls to him".

VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL, Svetlana Alexiévich

The language of Svetlana Alexiévich transformed a tragic event into a tragedy of Humanity, and the path she found to do so was via the sad stories of individuals. She not only touched our hearts, her language works because a traumatic state of affairs is best signified with everyday language used in personal conversation. That is what Wittgenstein would call language at work. It compares it to an engine **moving uphill**.

"The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work" says Wittgenstein in the PI.

WE ASK: where is the Svetlana Alexiévich of the **Deepwater Horizon**?

What we can say about is the data of the event... as if the engine were idling. That is OK when we do not need to go anywhere, but it is bad if we have to signify the depreciation of life, we do not fulfill our understanding of a tragedy that way.

CHAPTER 3... What does all this have to do with us? We state it loud and clear: conservation biologists are heroes, their work matters, it makes a

difference, the world would be much more compromised without their effort, but our successes are not hitting the essence of the problem. Species struggle to remain extant *vis-à-vis* human disproportional demand on Nature. In the meantime, the conservation movement cannot catch up with the Red Queen effect. We run behind and loose space in the priorities of humanity. WHY? Because the conservation crisis is not a situation wholly resolved within the scientific framework of conservation biology. The crisis of species remains as such because it is not properly **signified** as a crisis of Life. We then make this point:

The crisis of species is primarily one of values, it is rooted in language, and it will never be solved within the present utilitarian discourse championed by the paradigm of SD.

The value paradigm of the environmental movement is SD. We believe this paradigm is inappropriate to convey the moral meaning of a human-caused extinction crisis. We are not simply disapproving a perspective, we question its value system. The crisis cannot be overcome because, in the value context of SD, conservation efforts are imbedded in the ethical foundation of development, our thinking is coopted and confused, our language to describe the roots of the crisis is like an engine idling. We should not be surprised that the crisis intensifies... with our language we endorse and reinforce the value frameworks that causes it.

The way language operates is illustrated by the example of a person that has lost the wallet in a dark alley and looks for it only where there is a streetlight. The light is language... In fact, there are two elements in the crisis of biodiversity: one is the familiar annihilation of life; the other sits

within the conservation movement; it is a philosophical crisis with the discourse at its roots.

Morality exists in language before impacting behavior. On December 12, a New York Times article titled “*Brutal speech, violent acts*” (Sara Lipton; *The NY Times (International) Dec 12/13, 2015*) asked: “Do harsh words lead to violent acts?” The answer is YES. The author was writing about anti-Jewish rhetoric by Christians in the Middle Ages. She reported that: “*The first records of large-scale anti Jewish violence coincide with [a] rhetorical shift [in the language of contemporary Christians].*” Ferocious language in sermons, plays and written text aroused passions that ended in the death of thousands...

Language is at the origin of any new perspective of the world, it precedes value systems and the behaviors elicited by them. A recent article in the New Yorker on meteorological science, illustrates the point. Up until the mid-19th century...

“... nearly everything about weather remained a mystery...”

Writers in the Storm

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

The New Yorker, Nov 2015

This was because weather events were explained as Acts of God. The value system and the language of weather were rooted in religion. Therefore:

“Prior to the nineteenth century... those trying to make sense of the weather **“had no linguistic framework to scientifically explain what they saw... [A] Worcestershire diarist, writing in 1703 [said]: “Our Language is exceeding scanty & barren of words to use & express (the) various notions I have of Weather... I tire myself with Pumping for apt terms & similes to illustrate my Thoughts.”**

Early meteorologists not only developed an entirely new story about the weather; they had to develop the language to describe it... This could be said for any new discipline or view of the world, it is behind any paradigm

rupture in the history of science and of ideas and mental constructs, including SD.

The rhetoric of SD can be traced back to around 1987, with the Brundtland Report, also referred as *Our Common Future*. All the language of sustainability, “buzz words” such as natural capital and ecosystem services, did not exist before. These concepts have been indoctrinating our thinking, hopes and expectations for three decades, they have shaped the vision of the conservation movement. Institutions were created and adapted to them. The language of SD has defined what should be understood as species conservation, how it should be achieved and at what acceptable costs, as suggested by this statements:

OUR COMMON FUTURE (The Brundtland Report)

“Every nation has only limited resources at its disposal for dealing with conservation priorities... Explicit efforts to save particular species will be possible for only relatively few of the more spectacular or important ones.”

“In terms of genetic conservation, governments must be selective, and ask which gene reservoirs most merit a public involvement in protective measures.”

These statements are imbedded in a value system: it is OK, they suggest, that some life forms will have to go, human prosperity requires and justifies that! UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:

“The world is experiencing unprecedented prosperity, while the planet is under unprecedented stress...”

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: Launching of the UN 2012 Report
“Resilient People, Resilient Planet”

But why is the planet under unprecedented stress if the paradigm of SD has been operating for decades? Something did happen during those decades, the language of development crashed the environment. The four most critical global summits on the environment in 40 years were called:

1972: UN CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

1992: UN CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

2002: WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2012: UN CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Our Common Future was released in 1987, between the first two summits. Immediately after, development was equated to environment, suggesting a shift that ended up in the replacement of the latter by the former. And since the new millennium, the word ENVIRONMENT was dropped completely and was replaced by SD. We should not be fooled into thinking that this is “just trivial semantics”. UN conferences have consequences. The rhetoric from these summits is forced into our thinking, the proper use of the concepts opens or closes access to funding, forcing the implementation of an agenda.

According to Wittgenstein, a language is like a game that follows and is constituted by rules. SD is a language game, concepts are deployed in an

equivalent way as movements in a game that anyone can learn to play. But what happens if we play chess with a golf club? What will happen is the bewitchment of the mind.

“Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language” said Wittgenstein.

The way the language game of SD was set up from the beginning, it's internal rules, makes it impossible for us to make the moves in language that might help illuminate the meaning of an unprecedented calamity, such as the species extinction crisis.

CHAPTER 4. Language may not just confuse or bewitch us, and this is the most important point of this talk, language may fail us. We may face situations in which language is just not there to allow expression. Situations of insurmountable pain or conflict leave us speechless or incapable of meaningful expression. This is not just due to being shocked, it is like reaching a precipice. This is what the American philosopher, expert in Wittgenstein, Cora Diamond calls the *“painfully inexplicable”*. Soldiers in the trenches of the WWI were reported to be left speechless, the same happened with those that discovered the concentration camps in WWII. When face to explain what they lived through, they hit a precipice in language, one that was in part bridged lately only by introducing new language and concepts, such as "genocide" or “holocaust”. We propose that with the crisis of species we have reached a boundary in language. The discourse that occupies a place to provide clarity to the tragedy an only tell us the number of species threatened, duties to life remain ignored.

The limits of language against the crisis of species represent a philosophical problem well beyond the grammar or the semantics of the SD paradigm. To illustrate what it is to come to the boundary or precipice of language, let's imagine one is asked to accept a value system that allows **sustainable** child sexual slavery? That is: the slaves will be carefully nourished, educated, cured by doctors... What would you say? The idea causes a visceral rejection; the question is deeply revolting, we reply NO. Full stop. Would it help to develop an economic model? No, and no explanations needed! Moreover, if asked to elaborate, we would react with anger. But even if we try to explain our gut reaction, language may fail to represent the signification of the emotions. And the crisis of species, under the SD language game, does not even elicit emotions.

Why the biodiversity crisis does not elicit the same visceral rejection? Some will respond by saying that there is no comparison with the horrors of the worst slavery. Others will say that if development requires extinctions, and so be it. But our point is that for anyone who feels the visceral and inarticulated evil in the crisis, the only language available is one that **LACKS THE ABILITY TO REJECT ITS CAUSE**. The discourse of SD makes it impossible to simply say NO. Over focus on human benefits obscures and obfuscates the problem. In the same way that people could not conceive of forecasting weather, if it was God's will, we cannot see the value of life unless there is some utility for humans. **We can only represent the values involved in this visceral reaction as instrumental to the "sustainable" development of ONE species. This is an impediment in the signification of reality.**

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EPILOG... What to do?

The SD paradigm, we do believe, was created to better our world... but the language game of development has different rules than the game of Life and Nature, the value systems behind these games are different. The conservation community ignores this simple fact and the crisis intensifies. We struggle to reinforce, or make friendly adjustments to anthropocentric value systems that compromise life. SD is a robust machinery of language **and institutions**. It took decades and billions of dollars to build it. We cannot replace it with no resources at hand and no intention within the conservation community to do so... tough.

What we need is a massive inoculation of Svetlanas Alexievichs in the conservation community to help us find a way out of an indoctrination that disqualifies alternative language as either impractical, too idealistic, impossible given “human nature”, politically incorrect or insensitive to “human needs”. Leaders are not getting the urgency, they lack the torch that sheds light in the proper places. Quality of life and happiness require to be redefined, growth reframed, population growth placed back into the discussion, and some costs of development vehemently rejected. We should be able to empathize with Nature without feeling guilty of irrationality.

This audience is special, it is one that venerates humanity as much as non-human species, it is an audience predisposed to blur lines and this is a call for action. Let’s be aware of the value system that we support with our

language. The prosperity of humanity neglecting Nature is not right... but that has been said many times. Our contribution here is to point at a cause of such neglectance: a language that nourishes a value system that is not meant to create duties for Life.